



Language barriers

The Somali community is the third largest immigrant community in Portland Public Schools, but it's still waiting for district to find a better way to teach its failing youth

Batula Mohamud grew up in a refugee camp in Kenya. When she was placed into ninth grade after immigrating to the U.S., she didn't know how to write her name. She wasn't able to graduate from high school, but was accepted into a program at Portland Community College's Southeast Campus that allowed her to continue her studies without a diploma. She hopes to graduate with an Associate's Degree in 2016.

PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

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Batula Mohamud can't tell you her age. On paper she's 26, but she says she's most likely younger – probably 22 or 23 years old. She was born in Somalia but was forced to flee the country with her mother and siblings when she was a baby to escape the ongoing conflict. For most of her childhood, she lived in the arid, eastern region of Kenya at the Dadaab Refugee Camp, about 100 miles from the Somali border. She survived in the camp by cleaning dwellings and selling water to Somali shop owners in the mornings and working in the garden and delivering food rations to other residents of the camp in the afternoons.

When she immigrated to the U.S. in 2004 at the estimated age of 15, Mohamud couldn't even write her first name. Despite her lack of any formal education, she was placed in a ninth-grade classroom.

In the U.S., immigrant children are expected to assimilate. Federal law requires they get pulled out of class each day to take

English as a Second Language, or ESL, classes, usually taught by teachers who speak only English. Statistics show that among language programs, the basic, federally mandated ESL has the lowest long-term success rate. Mohamud attended high school for four years and left after finishing her senior year without a diploma.

Sheww never had a teacher who spoke her language.

There are nearly 500 Somali youth currently attending Portland Public Schools (PPS), and since 2010, they've combined to make the district's third largest immigrant community, behind Hispanics and Vietnamese. More than half don't speak any English, and some had little, if any, formal education prior to moving to the U.S. This is especially true of the most recent wave of Somali immigrants. Many children in this group were born in refugee camps in Kenya and, like Mohamud, never attended school. In addition, few have parents with the education necessary to help them with their homework.

Only 22 percent of Somali students in

Portland schools meet or exceed state reading standards, and only 12 percent meet or exceed state mathematics standards.

In 2013, out of 25 Somali youth in Portland who made it to their senior year, only nine graduated with a regular high school diploma.

The result, say members of the Somali community, is that the schools act more like a pipeline to prison than a means of education. Their kids struggle and then drop out. Many join gangs and start using drugs.

Speaking through a translator, Somali refugee Nuur Abdi says that he has two daughters in Southwest Portland's Wilson High School. He says it's difficult for them because no teacher at their school speaks their native language, and they don't get much help because they aren't fluent in English.

"One out of five Somali makes it to college. Their education goes down, and they look for jobs in warehouses, jobs with no experience needed, no future. If they're lucky they might get a GED," Abdi says.

The language situation has brought the

Somali community out *en masse*, asking PPS to teach its youth in a more effective way. Last year PPS officials told Somali parents that the two predominant Somali languages might be up next for a dual language immersion program – a program that's been proven to be the most effective means of teaching non-native English speakers in U.S. public schools. This news generated a lot of excitement among community members.

Studies show children in dual language programs generally do much better academically in the long run than English speaking students who are not in dual language programs.

PPS has dual language immersion classes in Spanish, Vietnamese, Russian, Japanese and Mandarin – languages that have a higher demand among English-speaking students that fill half the seats in a dual language classroom. These language programs start in kindergarten and go through elementary school, teaching both English and a foreign language to a classroom filled with native speakers of both languages. Each year, less and less of the foreign language is taught.

While there are other languages among immigrant students that are not represented in this special language program, Somali is the most commonly spoken.

In October, Mussé Olol, chairman of the Somali American Council of Oregon, encouraged the PPS Board of Education to support a Somali dual language immersion program within its system. He addressed the board saying the problems with Somali youth are originating in PPS. "I've seen today kids that are in the system, that are prone to fail. Especially our male youth are going to the justice system directly. In Seattle we have about 300 youngsters in the jail system there, and Portland is going in that direction if you don't reverse," Olol says.

Olol says the program would not only benefit children who don't speak English, it would also help Somali youth who were born in the U.S. to communicate better with their parents and older relatives, and help them to appreciate their families' culture – making their roots and the language spoken at home an asset, not something to be ashamed of.

Michael Bacon, PPS assistant director of the Dual Language Immersion Program says studies show students who read and write well in their first language perform better academically and learn a second language much faster. He was hoping to propose a Somali dual language program to the board of education this month, but a feasibility study conducted by PPS revealed major barriers.

However, on Jan. 20 – instead of proposing the program originally presented to the Somali community – Bacon and Debbie Armendariz, interim director of PPS Dual Language Immersion Program, proposed the creation of a native language literacy program. This program works like ESL. Students would be pulled out of regular classes to learn how to read and write in their native language for part of the day in addition to being pulled out to learn English for another part of the day. The Somali language lessons would also be used